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ABSTRACT

The information in this booklet has been developed in response to the many questions and concerns of parents whose children are nearly old enough to enter kindergarten in Nebraska. Questions answered include: What is kindergarten? When may a child enter kindergarten? Are children required to begin school when they turn 5-years-old? What about screening children before kindergarten? What is meant by readiness? Wouldn't many children benefit by waiting until they are 6-years-old to begin kindergarten? Do children who have attended preschool have an advantage in kindergarten? What is developmental kindergarten? How do young children's experiences in kindergarten help them later in school? Do kindergarten experiences help children in subjects like reading, mathematics, and science? What does play have to do with learning? Should reading be taught in the kindergarten? Is the trend toward all-day, alternate day kindergarten harmful to children? (RH)

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KINDERGARTEN
For Nebraska's Children

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Come As You Are:

KINDERGARTEN
for
Nebraska's Children*

Issued by
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*Formerly titled "Aims of Kindergarten". The new title "Come As You Are" is used with special thanks to James L. Hymes, pioneering American early childhood educator.

Come As You Are:
Kindergarten for Nebraska's Children

Introduction

The information in this booklet has been developed to respond to the many questions and concerns we have heard from parents as their children approach the time to begin kindergarten. Kindergarten programs have changed radically in the years since today's parents were themselves kindergarten students. This has happened largely because of what we believe to be an inappropriate viewpoint on the part of some parents and educators that kindergarten-aged children are now more capable and that therefore, new and "upgraded" academic programs are in order.

A reaction to that position is now emerging- a new recognition (a re-recognition, really) of the young child as not being so different after all, in the needs and capabilities of the age, from what children have always been and have always needed. We submit this discussion in part as a defense for preserving early childhood and in part as a suggestion for directions of proper emphasis. We hope it is helpful.

WHAT IS KINDERGARTEN?

Kindergarten is a place for children to gather to themselves a rich store of experiences that will improve their readiness for more formal school programs in the elementary grades and beyond.

WHEN MAY A CHILD ENTER KINDERGARTEN?

We have a law in Nebraska which prohibits a local board of education of a public or non-public school from enrolling a child in the kindergarten unless he or she has become five years of age by October 15th of that year of enrollment. If a school district chooses to, it can take part in the "Early Entrance" provisions of that law. These say that if a child can pass an I.Q. test with a high enough score, the October 15th deadline can be extended. Another permissive section of the same law allows a public school district to use public funds for the education of children under five, but it does not modify or waive the entrance age requirement for those children as they become eligible to enter the kindergarten.

ARE CHILDREN REQUIRED TO BEGIN SCHOOL WHEN THEY TURN FIVE?

No. The compulsory attendance law in Nebraska requires that parents send their children (between the ages of seven and sixteen) to an approved school. However, another law gives public and non-public schools the authority to assign children to the grade the school officials feel will best serve the child. Thus, even if a child does not come to school until he or she is seven, the school can require that the child begin at the kindergarten level.

WHAT ABOUT SCREENING CHILDREN BEFORE KINDERGARTEN?

Nebraska has had for many years, in the same law that deals with the entrance age for kindergarten, provisions for schools to require, along with verification of age, evidence of a physical examination and of immunization against certain diseases. Exemptions based upon religious convictions are available upon the parents' appeal, of course.

Serious questions can be raised about the direct authority and perhaps even the ethical propriety of a school district engaging in screening examinations that go beyond the physical. Some schools conduct extensive psychological and cognitive evaluations of preschoolers, usually at kindergarten round-up in the spring.

Recommendations coming out of such activities often range from suggestions about things that parents might do with their children during the summer in order to "help them get ready for school," to a suggestion (made with varying degrees of emphasis) that parents keep their child home for another year.

There is an exclusionary bias in this kind of thinking that seems to be in direct conflict with the encompassing language of our State Constitution. That language speaks of entitlement for "all persons between the ages of five and twenty-one years."

Further, language in the laws dealing with special education affirms the public school's responsibility to provide an appropriate educational program for **all** children in our state. For school officials to suggest in any way that a child is not ready for school is an admission that the school is not meeting its responsibilities under the Constitution and the statutes.

We reiterate an earlier statement that the school has the responsibility to accept the child **and** his or her developmental stage. School is the place where a child and parents should expect to find opportunities for growth and development from whatever starting point the child brings along.

We should not expect to gather together children of like abilities and accomplishments. There is a growing body of research that suggests that children of all ability levels learn more and are enriched in other ways by being schooled in a diverse group, rather than in one composed only of children having similar achievement levels.

WHAT IS MEANT BY READINESS?

Readiness is a state or condition of maturity of many related parts of the child. For example, for the child to be ready to read, eye muscles, hearing, and emotional state of mind must all have matured to the proper levels, and he or she should have accumulated those

experiences we have mentioned above. It is the function of the school to assist the child to achieve this state of readiness, not to expect that he or she "have it" and therefore already be ready for school.

WOULDN'T MANY CHILDREN BENEFIT BY WAITING UNTIL THEY ARE SIX TO BEGIN KINDERGARTEN?

This question was rarely raised before many kindergarten programs started to become more like first grade. While every parent has the legal right to delay a child's entrance until as late as age seven, we do not encourage the practice. The more the kindergarten is made up of six year olds, the more the "six-year-old" curriculum is confirmed and the less the needs of the five year old child are served. As this trend accelerates, we will have actually done away with the kindergarten program and, in effect, extended the high school graduation age by one year.

DO CHILDREN WHO HAVE ATTENDED PRESCHOOL HAVE AN ADVANTAGE IN KINDERGARTEN?

We note with growing concern the expectation of many parents and some kindergarten teachers that the preschool serve as a place for the child to "get ready" for kindergarten. This emphasis results in a focus on

"teaching" a narrow range of academic skills such as rote counting and letter identification to three-and-four-year old children (or the five-year-olds who have not gone to kindergarten). By serving so many five-year-olds, preschools have now often become **de facto** kindergartens. Parents who send five-year-olds to preschool are now paying for a year of education that formerly was provided by the public school.

Just as the kindergarten should not be seen as a place for the child to "get ready" for first grade, it is also inappropriate to view preschool programs in this way. A good preschool looks very much like a good kindergarten. It is a place for young children to begin to work and play in a group and to have **experiences** with a wider variety of materials and people than might happen in their home or neighborhood.

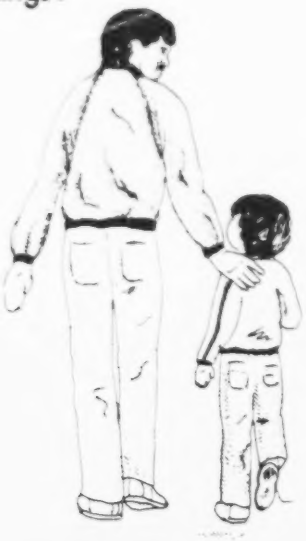
WHAT ARE "READINESS" OR "DEVELOPMENTAL" KINDERGARTENS?

A growing number of school districts are providing transition programs prior to or following the kindergarten year for children who appear unable to cope with the increasing curricular demands for achievement in the regular kindergarten. When these programs come before kindergarten they are often called "readiness" or "developmental" kindergartens. (The use of the term developmental in this context should not be confused with its traditional application connoting the natural process of growth through successive stages.)

Transition programs do represent a genuine effort on the part of school personnel to remedy problems associated with the changing nature of the kindergarten curriculum. However, most readiness kindergartens focus on perceived inadequacies of the children. Such early ability grouping of children may establish a pattern of lowered expectations that influences future educational experiences for those children.

HOW DO EXPERIENCES HELP?

Let's take a few examples to illustrate the importance of experience as it is related to one area of the curriculum- reading. Many times in their reading and listening children come across references such as: "hard," "round," "smooth," "heavy," "soft," or "rough." These words are designed to call up an image in the mind. Children need the experience of feeling things that are hard, smooth, soft, or rough so that an image will present itself and so that the word or words will have meaning. What better way is there to assure this happening than by having the child experience the feel of these things?



For young children, the best way to provide these experiences is to carefully plan the classroom environment so that children may choose activities from real materials that challenge children of differing maturity. The program should be defined in terms of a set of experiences offered to children rather than by listing things children should "know" by the time they enter first grade.

DO THESE EXPERIENCES HELP IN OTHER SUBJECTS TOO?

Yes, they do. A rich selection of **language arts** materials helps children to develop powers of auditory and visual discrimination. In a classroom rich in informal conversations, they are helped to correct speech immaturities. They begin to learn new ideas and to clarify half-formed or confused concepts. All of these learnings are fundamental to listening, speaking, reading, writing and spelling. A skilled teacher does not leave them to chance.

In **science**, a kindergarten full of opportunities for children to see, hear, smell, taste, handle, investigate, experiment, converse, and look at books helps them learn many things about science and to form beginning concepts about the natural physical world. These experiences encourage attitudes of "let's find out" or "let's try this." All of these are ways to learn and sometimes the way can be as important as the learning.

The **physical development** of children is one of kindergarten's main concerns. Good physical coordination, large muscle development and posture favorable to health are all fostered through hard, vigorous activities. Every day the program should provide safe and supervised opportunities to run, jump, skip, lift, and balance; to build with large blocks and boards; to climb, catch and throw; and to pretend. This is how young children develop strength, bodily vigor, balance, dexterity and motor control.

In **mathematics**, kindergarters should learn to answer such questions as: "how many?" "which one?" "how full?" and ideas such as larger, smaller, thick, thin, long, and short. Children should begin to recognize spaces of time as in parts of a day and that a clock "tells" time even though they may not be able to do it yet. They should understand that a calendar shows days and weeks, and that different shapes such as round and square are all around them. These are learnings possible in varying degrees for children of this age and are the foundations for later work in artihmetic.

In the area of **art**, kindergarten children should have daily opportunities to paint and draw and mold and build and to identify color and shape. Repeated experiences with many materials should be provided. A sense of competence will come of creative effort, if time and encouragement are available.

Through **music** activities that provide for experimentation with rhythm and tone, children will learn creative expression here too. Such freedom of expression and learned enjoyment of music can form the basis for a lifetime of satisfaction in the endeavor and in wide use of leisure time.

In a sense, however, learnings in **citizenship** form the heart of a kindergarten program. Except for health and safety, citizenship education is probably more important than any other single curriculum area. As the children live and play (work) together under their teacher's guidance, they learn increasingly to work cooperatively with each other; to take responsibility for their own actions; to consider the rights and feelings of others; to become dependable members of the group; to share in making and carrying out group and individual plans; to practice reasonable self-control; to assume responsibility for the care of equipment, materials, and the appearance of the room; to begin to understand some of the holidays we celebrate; to listen and to follow directions; to know about some of the work that adults do and to see the interdependence of people in the home, the school and the neighborhood; to be appreciative of the contributions of others; and to resolve minor conflicts with them.

This is a great deal to expect of our five-year-olds, and we must remember not to hold them all accountable for the same competencies in all of these things. They are just beginning.

WHAT DOES PLAY HAVE TO DO WITH LEARNING?

If we say that play is an enjoyable activity, then we hope that kindergarten can be full of play. On the other hand, if we say that play is simply "fooling around," then it has no place in the well-operated kindergarten. What an adult might regard as play is, in reality, the child's work- the opportunity to learn. As with all education, the kindergarten helps to prepare children for the future and for more complicated tasks. But we must not forget the "here and now" and the knowledge that reactions to today's situations can have a profound effect upon tomorrow. One respected early childhood educator says it this way: "The best preparation for tomorrow is a good today."

SHOULD READING BE TAUGHT IN THE KINDERGARTEN?

When we consider the wide range of activities that are conducted in a good kindergarten, we have to realize that many of them do bear directly on reading. So, in reality, the child is being taught to read. The problem is that all too often the activities we have described are not recognized by the casual observer as having the purpose they do. Their importance is slighted, or neglected altogether, and reliance is placed more and more upon the formal approaches to the learning of reading. This involves the use of books, workbooks, and skill sheets, usually part of a basal reading program, which are largely inappropriate for the maturity of kindergarten children.

When there are so many important things for the five-year-old to do, it seems very undesirable to deny the child those opportunities in favor of some formal paper-and-pencil, sit-down instruction. If we will give the youngster a chance to build a large store of experiences to draw upon later, the more formal programs that the child is likely to encounter as he or she moves on through the school will be easier to handle.

Occasionally a child comes to kindergarten who has already learned how to read; or who has an intense interest and desire to do so. When this happens, the kind of kindergarten atmosphere we have been describing here will not be discouraging to him or her. On the contrary, that child's store of experiences can also be built to a very good advantage, and the interest in reading stimulated. It will grow as encouragement is offered to share stories with the teacher and with other children.

The attitudes toward school and toward reading that are formed by kindergartners will remain with them for a long time. If they are hurried or forced into a situation for which they are not ready, the results can be disastrous as far as their subsequent reactions and successes are concerned.

IS THE TREND TOWARD ALL-DAY, ALTERNATE DAY KINDERGARTEN HARMFUL TO CHILDREN?

For many years some rural school districts have operated their kindergarten programs on an all-day schedule during the spring semester. A few years ago, the Legislature modified the law so that all districts (except Omaha and Lincoln) could offer kindergarten any combination of days or hours that equal one-half year. For districts wishing to save money on transportation and needing to offer two or more sections of kindergarten, this has led to the development of the all day, alternate day concept.

Research on the effects of this practice is limited or inconclusive. Considering that substantial numbers of children attend day care centers on an all day basis, many from the time they are infants, it would be hard to argue that a full day of kindergarten is harmful. The inconsistency of the alternate day is of greater concern. Since young children view time very differently than adults, parents of children in alternate day programs need to help their children to understand the schedule.

IN CONCLUSION

Today's good kindergarten will provide an educational setting for five-year-olds to collect a rich store of experiences; to build a healthy self-concept based upon a growing understanding of themselves and of their abilities; to begin to resolve conflict between self and others; and to form attitudes about school and learning that will encourage further learning.

When a sound kindergarten program is followed by an equally sound elementary school program, remedial problems can be lessened, retentions can disappear, enthusiastic students can result. Let's try to insure that all children have this opportunity.

They are five only once.

Would you like to have further ideas about appropriate activites and environments for young children? Other publications for both parents and educators are available free or for a modest cost. Contact the Early Childhood Consultant, Nebraska Department of Education, 301 Centennial Mall South, P.O. Box 94987, Lincoln, Nebraska 68509.